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ABSTRACT

Patricia Bizzell argues that inquiry into ethics and English studies is paralyzed by the view that "the imposition of ideological agendas...[is]...morally questionable," yet "our moral sensibility motivates us to promote particular ethic positions." The field is caught in this dilemma because its postmodern skepticism forces it to acknowledge that there are no universal values, yet its teachers and scholars want a subject position allowing them to appeal to some standards even if they are not universal. The question this dilemma raises is how can the fields of rhetoric and composition conceive of ethics in a postmodern manner and still allow for moral agency and authority. The problem with the "deontological" view, which characterizes the view of Western culture at large and the liberal enlightenment view of the academy, is that it decides what is right, good, and of value prior to any rhetorical discussion or inquiry. This means that the abstract values of an ethical rhetoric are not tied to contextual constraints. In "After Virtue," Alasdair MacIntyre shows how arguments about abortion are constructed in such a way as to preclude any discussion; the speaker either forces her audience to accept her premises or labels that audience immoral. By directing attention to the subject, Michel Foucault suggests one possible way out of this predicament and points to inquiry into subjectivity theory. He encourages the speaker to ask, "How have I constructed myself as a moral agent?" (TB)

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Resisting Ethical Paralysis: A Postmodern Critique of Ethics

Paper Presented at the 1995 Conference on College Composition and Communication

Washington, D.C.

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Resisting Ethical Paralysis:
A Postmodern Critique of Ethics

Patricia Bizzell argues that inquiry into ethics and English studies is paralyzed by our view that "the imposition of ideological agendas...[is]...morally questionable," yet "our moral sensibility motivates us to promote particular ideological agendas, or if you prefer, particular ethical positions" (1). She notes that the field is caught is this dilemma because its postmodern skepticism forces us to acknowledge that there are no universal values, yet we as teachers and scholars want a subject position that will allow us to appeal to some standards even if they are not universal. The question this dilemma raises is how can the field of rhetoric and composition conceive of ethics in a postmodern manner and still allow for moral agency and authority. However, it is not only the field's move to postmodernism that challenges our concepts of and desires for moral agency. Our personal, public, and disciplinary experiences with moral debate also hinder us from making a thorough inquiry into the relationship between ethics and our field. Bizzell

notes that we have difficulty with this issue because we believe it is wrong to impose an ideology or moral agenda on others. But why is our understanding of moral debate limited to understanding it as an imposition of moral agendas? Why don't we view the question of ethics as an opportunity for discussion and collaborative creation of values? Part of the reason we don't think about ethics in these terms is because the dominate political culture is caught up in the imposition of moral codes and agendas -- not discussion.

There are many ways to characterize the ethical perspective we find both in our culture at large as well as in the liberal enlightenment culture of most English departments. Arnold I. Davidson labels it as an Anglo-American view. According to Davidson, such a view understands ethics as a system of foundational or universal premises that generate moral codes. In moral philosophy, this perspective is often called a deontological view. Deontological ethical systems (of which there are many) can be characterized by their adherence to one universal rule which is used to generate moral codes. The Kantian Categorical Imperative is one such deontological system which rests on the universal premise that one can discover the right thing to do by imagining oneself to be the sovereign of the world. Each act of the sovereign would become a universal law for the world. For instance, if one were angry at another and wanted to strike them, one would first have to think whether or not he/she would want this as a rule for the world. In other words, every time someone got angry at me or another, they

would strike that person. Would I want to live in a world where people were allowed to strike each other out of anger? No, I would not, so according to the Kantian Categorical Imperative, it is morally wrong to strike people out of anger.

The problem with a deontological view or an Anglo-American view of ethics is not that the universal principles are hurtful in and of themselves. Certainly, Kant's principle could be used to prohibit violence which most of us would agree is a good thing. The real problem with such systems is that they impose what Jaqueline Martinez refers to as ethical rhetorics. That is to say that what is good, right, or of value is decided on prior to any rhetorical discussion or inquiry. This lack of discussion means that the abstract values of an ethical rhetoric are not tied to contextual constraints. By creating values outside a rhetorical context, an ethical rhetoric precludes these values from discussion, so in a specific context, the moral agent is only left with two choices: stick to the Categorical Imperative and be "moral" or violate the imperative and be "immoral." The subject position of the moral agent as well as his or her ability to create values in context are ignored. The ethical agent is put in a position where he or she must simply consent to follow or not to follow the ethical choice being presented to him or her by the rhetor or particular ethical system.

To get a better sense of how the consequences of an ethical rhetoric create paralysis and violence in moral debate, it is useful

to turn to Alasdair MacIntyre's After Virtue. MacIntyre notes that the most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is that so much of it is used to express disagreement (6). Not only is contemporary moral utterance characterized by disagreement, but MacIntyre also points out that there seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement and therefore no end to such arguments (6). A set of examples of this difficulty MacIntyre cites are the following three arguments surrounding the abortion issue:

> (a) Everybody has certain rights over his or her own person, including his or her own body. It follows from the nature of these rights that at the stage when the embryo is essentially part of the mother's body, the mother has a right to make her own uncoerced decision as to whether she will have an abortion or not. Therefore abortion is morally permissible and ought to be allowed by law.
>
> (b) I cannot will that my mother should have had an abortion when she was pregnant with me, except perhaps if it had been certain that the embryo was dead or gravely damaged. But if I cannot will this in my own case, how can I consistently deny to others the right to life that I claim for myself? I would break the so-called Golden Rule unless I denied that a mother has in general a right to an abortion. I am not of course thereby committed to the view that abortion ought to be legally prohibited.

> (c) Murder is wrong. Murder is the taking of an innocent life. An embryo is an identifiable individual, differing from a newborn infant only in being at an earlier stage on the long road to adult capacities and, if any life is innocent, that of an embryo is. If infanticide is murder, as it is, abortion is murder. So abortion is not only morally wrong, but ought to be legally prohibited. (6-7)

Each of these arguments has 3 features which help us to classify them as ethical rhetorics. First, each argument ignores contextual constraints by making claims that abortion is morally right or morally wrong without considering the current concrete situation that is causing these arguments to surface. Not only do these arguments ignore the current context, but, as MacIntyre points out, their seemingly objective and impersonal nature ignores the historical context that these arguments have been drawn from. For instance, MacIntyre indicates that position (a) in the abortion debate which uses a Lockean concept of rights is pitted against in (b) a "view of universalizability" which can be traced to Kant and perhaps even to Christ (10). MacIntyre points out here that the real problem is not that we have forgotten who these arguments belong to but that we are unaware of the "complexity of history and the ancestry of such argument" (10) which have appeared in "intricate bodies of theory and practice which constitute human cultures" (10).

A second characteristic of all of these arguments is that they

abstract the values motivating them outside the realm of rhetorical discussion. This is problematic because as MacIntyre points out even though each argument is "logically valid or can be expanded so that it is so" the premises cannot be rationally weighed against each other (MacIntyre 8) without discussion. Since the premises of these arguments cannot be rationally proved, such arguments often carry what MacIntyre calls a "shrillness" to them, and any collision between positions often becomes a shouting match of "assertion" and "counterassertion" (MacIntyre 8). The "winner" of such arguments is often the one who can shout the loudest and endure the longest. Unfortunately, we have also seen a growing tendency in the abortion debate for violence as a means of persuasive argument when the assertions and/or counterassertions of the pro-life movement have failed to convince those participating in abortion that they should stop their immoral acts.

The third way these arguments adhere to the pattern of an ethical rhetoric is the way they ignore the subject positions of both the rhetor and the audience. The rhetor of these arguments is obscured by the rational and impersonal tone put forth by these arguments. This tone suggest that these arguments' premises were created from facts and not beliefs (MacIntyre 10). This characteristic perhaps contributes to the shrill nature of these arguments because each argument with its impersonal and perhaps objective tone also carries with it a sense that this argument is self-evidently morally right. With this undertone prevalent in many

ongoing moral debates (such as the abortion debate), the possibility for agreement or consensus is further marred by a desire for the speaker or writer of the argument to "be right" and to support the "moral rightness" of her/his argument. In a way, this impersonal tone raises the stakes of the debate so that now what is at issue is not only abortion but the moral rightness of the speaker's or writer's beliefs.

Not only is the subject position of the rhetor obscured, but the subject position of the audience is very limited if not ignored. The audience is put in a position where they can either agree or disagree with the rhetor's arguments. However, if the audience disagrees with the rhetor they will be sanctioned by being labeled as immoral, or as we have seen in some extreme cases of the abortion debate, they may even be killed. The audience is also not given the opportunity to have their values considered in the debate since each side has already decided what is right. Finally, since the rhetor's value decisions were made before the argument began, those in the audience who are undecided about the issue have no way to weigh the merits of each position. The audience simply has to choose what side to take. Even if the audience tries to create its own position, it is unlikely to be heard in the din of assertion and counterassertion occurring between the pro-lifers and pro-choicers.

In the end, ethical rhetorics privilege moral victory and moral rightness over the process of moral agreement. We carry the violence created by these ethical rhetorics with us and become

paralyzed in the face of them. We have a sense whether through postmodernism, intuition, or some other means that ethical rhetorics are misguided but instead of finding a new way to talk about ethics we retreat to a position of liberal individualism where everyone has a "right" to his or her position. By making this retreat, we condemn ourselves to a paralyzing moral relativism -- if everyone is right or has a right to her/his position, how can we come to any moral agreement? By letting every position stand, by not trying to come to any moral agreement, we create an environment in which groups of people with similar positions will band together to aggressively advocate their side just as the pro-lifers and pro-choicers have done. In this way, we reinscribe ethical rhetorics' power over us. Liberal individualism's inability to help us create consensus or move in this mine field of positions suggests that ethical rhetorics -- even though appalling to us -- are the only route to moral agency. In trying to get out of an ethical rhetoric frame, we are caught in a vicious circle which leaves us to ask: How do we embark on moral discussions? How do we come to moral agreement? How can we live ethical lives?

My paper won't answer these questions or offer a solution to the paralysis and violence that can come about when incommensurable moral positions face off in public, private, or disciplinary arenas. However, by employing Foucault's ethical analytic, I can point to subjectivity theory as an area of inquiry that might help us address some of these problems. Foucault deconstructs the Anglo-American

view of ethics by positioning moral codes, moral actions, and ethics all under the historically contingent label "morals" and redefining ethics as the relationship one ought to have with oneself which he calls the "rapport 'a soi." Foucault explains that the rapport 'a soi "determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions" (352). According to Davidson, some philosophers have found Foucault's definition of ethics to be "idiosyncratic." However, as Davidson points out, this definition allows Foucault to "isolate a distinctive stratum of analysis typically overlooked" by moral sociologists who consider people's moral behavior and moral philosophers who work towards creating an ethics that will generate and justify a set of moral codes (226).

What Foucault's view does for us is to encourage us to start an inquiry into ethics not by labeling various positions as ethical or unethical and not by asking the question how can moral rightness be proved, but rather his view encourages us to ask: How have I constructed myself as a moral agent? How do you construct yourself as a moral agent? What parts of you and I are relegated to the concern of moral conduct (352)? How are you and I invited or incited to recognize our moral obligations (353)? What do you and I do to make ourselves ethical (354)? Who do we aspire to be so that we behave in a moral way (355)? These questions allow us to interrogate the agent behind the moral debate at a moment prior to debates over moral codes thus allowing us to identify the context

motivating the debate as well as the moral agent's motivating values and beliefs. If we ask these questions of all the participants of the abortion debate -- including speakers and hearers -- we can begin to understand the subject positions of each side. Rather than encouraging a process of further disidentification between participants, an inquiry into how these participants have constructed themselves as moral agents can offer a path toward some identification and understanding before the debate/discussion starts. However, Foucault is only a start -- his view of ethics points to inquiry into subjectivity theory as a way of understanding and perhaps strategically responding to the paralysis and violence created by contemporary forms of moral debate.

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